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Repairing weak levees is overdue

Inside Bay Area

CALIFORNIAS leaky levees are finally getting the attention they deserve. Whether the concern shown by elected officials translates into fast action remains to be seen.

Since Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Rep. Richard Pombo toured the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta a week ago, the governor and Feinstein have been pushing for \$100 million in repairs to 24 weakened levees this year.

Two days after the tour, Schwarzenegger declared a state of emergency, enabling California to suspend environmental protection and contracting requirements for speedy repairs. Then he flew to Washington, D.C., to attend the national governors conference and seek federal support.

Although repairing a couple dozen of the worst, century-old levees wont eliminate the long-term investment California must make throughout the 1,600-mile system, its a step forward that could save us money and lives in the short term.

We are not really responding fast enough, says Schwarzenegger. Our levees ... are one big earthquake or major storm away from a major Katrina-like disaster. Later, he added, Its irresponsible for us not to act quickly.

Under the plan, the state would use budget reserves to pay its share of the repairs. Schwarzenegger has asked the Bush administration for \$56 million. And, Feinstein and Sen. Barbara Boxer said they will try to get federal funds for immediate levee repairs by including it in spending bills for Iraq and Hurricane Katrina relief.

A hurdle is getting the feds to agree that our aging levee system is an emergency warranting immediate response. If it doesnt, the environmental review process would not be waived, delaying the work. Schwarzenegger says Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff has agreed to visit the Delta and assess its vulnerability.

Were asking the federal government to . . . spend a little bit of money (now) in order to save a lot of money (later), says the governor.

Although both sides of the political aisle agree with the need to rebuild levees in the Delta and along the Sacramento River, some Democrats and environmentalists consider Schwarzeneggers sudden devotion to the cause a political ploy by a weakened, vulnerable Republican governor seeking re-election.

But Feinsteins strong support has helped temper such criticism. The respected Democratic leader says it is wise to move expeditiously to take care of the most vulnerable levees.

On Wednesday she delivered a strong synopsis of what is at stake if the system that supplies water to 22 million Californians is breached:

Youd lose a third of Sacramento; youd have 20 feet of water; youd lose two-thirds of the water supply for California. The economy would stop, said Feinstein. The question is: Do you wait for it to happen or do you do something about it now? And theres only one answer: You do something about it now.

While the political timing may be suspect, the need is obvious. If we can get federal approval and funding, repairing our most vulnerable levees could avert a disaster as early as this year or next.

It would also get the long-overlooked rehabilitation of our levee system under way. That cant happen soon enough.